

Prevent sexual harassment

How to talk about boundaries and culture in order to both deal with and prevent sexual harassment in the workplace



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The aim and the topics of the course

- The aim of the course and what to expect:
 - 1) You will gain important, fundamental *knowledge* about sexual harassment
 - 2) You will gain new *tools* on how to both deal with and prevent sexual harassment
- The topics that will be examined:

What sexual harassment is and who is mostly subjected to it
How to spot a sexual harassment case
Important do's and don't's when having the difficult conversation
How to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace through practicing communicating about culture and boundaries
- At the end: A quiz!



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Establishing the aim of the course:

The aim of this course is first of all to give the participants some *knowledge* about sexual harassment: What it is/how to define sexual harassment, how to spot a case/knowledge about how a person subjected to sexual harassment may react, how to talk about sexual harassment/what to say and what *not* to say *and* why practicing how to communicate about culture and boundaries in the workplace is important. This knowledge is necessary to have if one wishes to deal professionally and respectfully with sexual harassment and to help prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

And secondly, the aim of the course is also to give the participants concrete *tools* to both deal with and prevent sexual harassment in an enlightened way.

The topics that this course will examine:

- 1) What is sexual harassment and who are at risk of being subjected to it?
- 2) How to spot a case/someone who has experienced sexual harassment
- 3) How to have the difficult conversation about sexual harassment with someone who has been subjected to it. What to say and what not to say.
- 4) How to work actively with preventing sexual harassment in the workplace and why conversations about boundaries and culture is important.

At the end of the course, there will be a six-question quiz to see what the participants have learned through the course.

What is sexual harassment?

- ▶ Three types:
physical (touch)
verbal (sexist/sexual "jokes", comments, conversation)
non-verbal (sexual posters hanging in the workplace, stares)
- ▶ Personal or environmental sexual harassment:
Is the sexual harassment directed toward a specific person/persons?
Is there a more general sexual tone/environment in the workplace?
- ▶ Who?
Mostly: young females in a low-power position
gender/sexual orientation ↔ age ↔ power



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- Sexual harassment can be divided into three different types: physical, verbal or non-verbal sexual harassment.
 - 1) Physical sexual harassment is where someone experiences unwanted touch anywhere on the body.
 - 2) Verbal sexual harassment can be everything from unwanted conversations about sex, body and other private/uncomfortable topics to sexist or sexual "jokes" or comments about someone's body, sex life, appearance and so fourth.
 - 3) Non-verbal sexual harassment can be someone experiencing being stared at/eyed up or posters with sexual content hanging on the walls of the workplace
- If a workplace has identified a problem with sexual harassment it may be beneficial to differentiate between personal and environmental sexual harassment. Personal sexual harassment is sexual harassment that is directed toward a specific person. Environmental sexual harassment is not directed toward a specific person, but someone may feel sexually harassed if a workplace for example has sexual posters hanging on the walls, or if the "tone" or language at the workplace is generally sexualized. Someone can experience sexual harassment from both personal and environmental sexual harassment. The reason it can be beneficial to differentiate between the two is that the solution to the problem may

differ regarding what kind of harassment is the problem. You may ask: Is there generally a sexualized and transgressive culture, or is the problem rather that one or a few employees do not understand what proper workplace behaviour is? The answer to this question may point to different solutions to the problem.

- Studies show that young women in a less powerful position in a workplace are most at risk of being subjected to sexual harassment. However, who experiences sexual harassment can be understood as an interaction between three factors: gender/sexual orientation, age, and power. Power can mean many things: Power can be an employee's status and formal power in a cooperation, it can mean informal power (e.g. being well-liked, respected, looked up to, skilled, a long-time employee). But power also relates to what kind of general job security, pay level, or union representation an employee has. For example, women workers who are low paid, who do not have job security, or who do not have union representation are especially vulnerable– they are in a vulnerable position in general, and also when it comes to being subjected to sexual harassment: In this situation the women often have very little opportunity to get away from a sexually harassing work situation, speaking up, getting help or the like.

Understanding sexual harassment through the lens of gender<->age<->power also means that a female CEO with a lot of power will perhaps not be thought of someone who is likely to be subjected to sexual harassment because she is in a position of power. However, because of her gender it is not unlikely that the female CEO will experience sexual harassment from her male subordinates. Studies have also shown that gay men may be at a higher risk of being subjected to sexual harassment. **And generally LGBTQ+ people – people who in any way do not fit into the gendered and sexual norms of a society (being cisgendered and heterosexual) – are also more at risk of being subjected to sexual harassment.** Even though it is more unlikely, the male, straight, powerful, experienced CEO *can* also be subjected to sexual harassment – it is just a lot more statistically unlikely than the young, less powerful woman or even the female CEO.

How to spot a case – what to expect and look for

- ▶ A *not* very likely scenario:
"Hi. I have a problem: I have been subjected to sexual harassment and I would like some help."
- ▶ A more likely scenario:
Seemingly "random" or insignificant questions (about vacation, a pay check, a task)
Slow to tell/open up
Understating what has happened
Fearful of not being believed
- ▶ Why this reaction?
Shame, guilt, and taboo is associated with sexual harassment which makes it hard to talk about



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It is important to know that it is quite unlikely that an employee will come up to a designated representative, a colleague or a boss and say something like: "I have a problem: I have been subjected to sexual harassment and I would like some help". Of course the ideal is that a workplace has done so much to focus on the topic of sexual harassment that an employee can recognize right away that they have been subjected to sexual harassment, that the person knows exactly where in the organization to seek help, and that the person does not feel ashamed about viewing themselves as a victim of sexual harassment and therefore is able to tell freely about their experiences, trusting they will be met with respect and professionalism.

However, this ideal is unfortunately often very far away from the actual reality in most workplaces.

It is imperative to understand that sexual harassment – because it is associated with the body, sexuality, and feelings of guilt and shame – is a very taboo topic for most people to talk about. Especially in a work setting. And that is why, for most people, they don't just come out and tell when they have been subjected to sexual harassment.

The fact that sexual harassment is such a taboo topic for most people to talk about – especially those who have experienced it – highly affects how people tend to open up about their experiences with being sexually harassed.

Some people who have been subjected to sexual harassment will never talk about their experiences. The person may question whether he/she/they have done something wrong or done something to “invite” the harassment – or he/she/they may simply be too embarrassed to tell what has happened. And if there is no evidence or the person who has harassed them is a liked and respected colleague/boss/employee it may feel too risky, scary or uncomfortable to tell anyone and the person may fear not being believed.

However, those people who actually try to speak up and seek help, often do it very subtly and sometimes almost unnoticeably. Often the person, who has been subjected to sexual harassment, will contact a colleague, boss, a designated representative or someone else with a seemingly “random” or rather insignificant question. For example about something to do with their vacation, a pay check they would like to ask about or a question about a task at work. If someone comes to you with a question that may seem a little small or insignificant it may be a sign that the person is trying to muster the courage to talk to you about something more serious, but does not know how to start the conversation. This situation really requires that the other person, whom the harassed has asked to talk to about this seemingly small thing, can read between the lines and take responsibility and ask: Is everything okay? Is there something else you would like to talk about? Reassure the person that they can trust you and that they can tell you everything – and that no topic or problem is off the table.

Even then – when a person subjected to the sexual harassment may have opened up about the fact that they *do* have another issue they would like to talk about – the person may be slow to tell all the details of the incident(s). People who have been subjected to sexual harassment may also understate what has happened, because they want to get reassurance from the other person that they can be trusted and that the other person cares about what is being told. For this reason, this kind of conversation often requires a lot of time and listening. Don’t rush the person, and assure them that it is important that they tell it as it is and that you believe them.

The difficult conversation: Do's and don't's – pointers about what to say and what not to say

- ▶ Don't say:
"Have you experienced **sexual harassment**?"
"**Are you sure** the person meant it that way?"
"Is it possible the person thought **you were up for it**?"
"Why didn't you tell the person to stop?"
- ▶ Do say:
"Has anyone done or said something to you that **you didn't like**?"
"**Your experience** is what matters, not the *intention* of the harasser"
"This is not your fault. You have done **nothing wrong**."
- ▶ But most importantly: Create trust *and* dare to ask!



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Everybody is different. But there are some general do's and don't's to take notice of when it comes to what to say and what not to say in a situation where someone has opened up to you about experiencing sexual harassment – or if you suspect that something has happened and you want to try asking the person about it.

It is generally not a good idea to start out by asking very directly or just bluntly say: "Have you experienced sexual harassment?" The reason is that most people don't identify with a "victim of sexual harassment". The term is a little too abstract and the word "sexual harassment" is associated with something taboo, and something that perhaps feels embarrassing. Therefore, this word does not make for a good conversation starter.

If you suspect something, try asking more indirectly and without using the actual words "sexual harassment". For example you could ask: "Has anyone done or said something to you that you didn't like?". That way you can slowly but surely open up a conversation without jumping right into the "sexual" part which many people find difficult to talk about. Then, when you have slowly established what has happened and you have had a thorough and trustful conversation with the person, you may start to open up about the fact that what you have heard the person tell you, is in fact sexual harassment.

When or if the other person then says “yes” to your question about having experienced something they didn’t like, and perhaps has begun to open up about their experiences, it is very important never to say anything that can trigger guilt or shame in them.

Because many people who are subjected to sexual harassment already feel guilty (“did I do something to initiate it? Did I send the wrong signals? Why didn’t I say no”) and feel ashamed because they have been forced into a sexualized situation they did not want – it is very important never to ask any questions that the person subjected to sexual harassment may hear as a comment on their own responsibility for the situation: Never say/ask things like: “Are you sure he/she/they meant it that way?” or “Is it possible he/she/they thought you were up for it?” or “why didn’t you tell the person to stop?”.

Always remember to say that none of this is their fault and that they have not done anything wrong or done anything to deserve this.

Also, let the person know that how he/she/they feels is what matters, not the intention of the person who harassed them. Perhaps the person who harassed did not mean to hurt the person who feels sexually harassed. But that is not what is important in the conversation with the person who has experienced being sexually harassed. The important thing is to validate the harassed persons’ experience in this initial conversation and in general.

It is important to note that one should never put too much emphasis on the fact that it is important to say “stop” or say “no” to sexual harassment. If the person wants to or feels like it is possible to say “no” when or after being sexually harassed that is of course fine. But it should not be a demand or something that is expected. Some people freeze and just cannot say anything. Others fear for their job. And others just don’t feel comfortable saying “no”. Either way, saying “no” also often does not even help. Again, the focus should *not* be on what the person subjected to sexual harassment did or did not do.

But even more important: If you cannot create the much needed trust between you and the other person, you will not be successful in establishing any conversation about sexual harassment. All of these pointers about what to say and what not to say will help you create the trust that is so crucial to create in order to carry out these difficult conversations. So trust is very important to focus on when dealing with and preventing sexual harassment.

And last, but not least: Dare to ask! Even though you might say something wrong, it is always better to talk about the issue and give the person a chance to tell what has

happened than being to afraid of saying the wrong thing and therefore just keeping silent.

An important take-away here is that words matter. It matters how we talk about sexual harassment if we wish to both tend to an actual, concrete sexual harassment issues we encounter, *and* if we wish to prevent sexual harassment.

Practice talking about boundaries and culture! But why and how?

- Conversations about boundaries and what workplace culture you and your co-workers would like, is essential to getting a sexual harassment-free work environment.
- These types of conversations are important because they help everyone being more sensitive to the fact that everyone has different boundaries *and* they practice everyone in becoming better at communicating their own boundaries, their likes and dislikes.
- The more often these conversations are practiced, the better!
- **Exercise.** Spend 10 minutes to each write down:
 - Five ways in which this conversation could be begun/implemented in your workplace
 - Five questions that you think could initiate a conversation about boundaries and culture

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It is key to start *and* keep a conversation amongst everyone in a workplace going about what kind of a work culture you would all like: What kind of behaviour/language and so on is crossing a boundary, what is okay and where are the grey areas?

The initial intention of this kind of conversation is actually **not** to talk explicitly about sexual harassment. The reason is that these types of more general conversation about what a good work environment is to you, what kind of boundaries you have and potentially why, are a prerequisite to being able to talk about sexual harassment and a prerequisite to preventing it. Because if the people who are part of a certain workplace are not used to expressing and communicating about these kinds of topics, it will almost certainly not be possible to have a respectful and constructive conversation about sexual harassment or a harassment-free work environment.

The other reason is that these kinds of conversations are preventive of sexual harassment in and of themselves: If it becomes normal for co-workers for example to express their needs and boundaries and, in a constructive way, tell someone when they have overstepped a boundary or have done something that hurt them – when there is a focus on this way of relating to one's co-workers, it will likely become much

easier for an employee to think that unwanted sexual attention is *not* okay if it does not *feel* okay, and that will likely make it easier for someone who has experienced being sexually harassed to seek help – and trust that they will be believed.

Therefore, these types of conversations that are not directly about sexual harassment, actually help preventing sexual harassment because it makes everyone become more sensitive to the fact that each person has different boundaries, and these conversations also practice everyone to become better at communicating their own boundaries, needs, likes, dislikes and so on. It creates a norm or a culture where everyone knows they can say how they feel and that everyone's experiences and boundaries are valid and important.

One of the most important things about these conversations about culture and boundaries, is that they have to happen again and again and again. The more often you have it, the better. Because each time you talk about these topics you remind everyone about your workplace's values, customs and what kind of culture you have agreed upon cultivating.

To sum up:

The aim is not that every single person in a workplace has to agree to a certain or very specific way to talk or behave – or that every workplace should have the same set of values and the same sort of work culture. Of course you can and should agree upon some general standards or values you want to cultivate in your workplace. But the aim of these conversations is also to *practice* talking about these topics – and not necessarily to come to some kind of very narrow conclusion of how you must interact with each other.

Exercise.

(To engage the participants have each participant write down five ways in which this conversation could be implemented in their own workplace. What is meant here is that they must come up with how this conversation can be begun and implemented at work – when, how, in which settings and so on.)

Furthermore, ask each participant to write down five questions that the conversation could revolve around – questions that the participants think would open a good and relevant conversation about boundaries and what kind of work culture each person in the workplace would like to have.)

(After the 10 minutes or so, have each participant read aloud to everyone in the course what they have written down and hear why they wrote what they did.)

(When the participants present their ideas the teacher will write down each idea in a document that the participants will get after the course has ended so that they alle

have some very concrete ideas about how to work with preventing sexual harassment in their own workplace.)

More ideas

- Ideas for how to initiate conversations about boundaries and culture:

Arrange an after-work meeting on "boundaries and culture"

Have your boss mention what your idea of a good workplace culture is before an office party

Write about the culture you want in your team's newsletter

Put up visible posters with some quotes or lines to remind about your culture/values

- Examples of questions you could talk about:

What kind of humour do we like/want? Do we hug or not?
How do we compliment each other? How do we deal with issues or disagreements?



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(After the participants have each shared their five ideas and five question the teacher can share some of his/her/their own.)

Note:

Remind the participants that it is not advantageous for example to invite to a "meeting about sexual harassment". Again, being so explicit and mentioning "sexual harassment" often makes people shut down a little bit and it often does not inspire open conversation and participation, because the words "sexual harassment" are associated with so much taboo. Instead, invite to a "meeting about what kind of workplace we want: language, boundaries, humour and culture" – this could be the title of the meeting. Then it is much more likely that people will show up and participate. Then, maybe towards the end of the meeting, or after a couple of meetings, you may begin to open up a more explicit conversation about sexual harassment.

Create a policy on sexual harassment

- What sexual harassment is in concrete terms
- That sexual harassment is not tolerated (this does not necessarily mean that one has to lose his or her job because of an inappropriate joke, but it is about sending out the signal that sexual harassment in the workplace is not okay)
- What behaviour/language/humour/touch/atmosphere is considered unacceptable
- That sexual harassment is defined by the experience of the offended and not by the intention of the offender.
- What second-hand sexual harassment is and that victims of SOSH are also covered by this policy
- Who in the company to contact in case a person is subjected to, or sees others subjected to sexual harassment.
- What disciplinary action to apply for sexual harassment/whether there are sanctions for sexually harassment behaviour (some companies will not impose sanctions in advance, because each case is evaluated on a case-by-case basis)
- That one can speak anonymously about cases



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A more formal, and also a very important way, to manifest the kind of work culture you want in your workplace, is to create a detailed policy about sexual harassment – the more detail, the better. This is very important because it states clearly what is expected of each employee/employer, and it creates a standard for what people in the company can expect from their work and co-workers.

A policy can also in itself have a preventive effect – especially if it is not just hidden away in a corner. A tip is to make sure that each employee in their beginning of their employment, reads the policy. And as with every other preventive tool: Use it often and talk about the policy – what it says and why – as often as possible.

This is a list of the most important things a policy on sexual harassment should include.

has to lose his or her job because of an inappropriate joke, but it is about sending out the signal that sexual harassment in the workplace is not okay)

- What behaviour/language/humour/touch/atmosphere is considered unacceptable: It is very important to make the quite abstract term “sexual harassment” as concrete as possible. Therefore, a good idea is to describe some examples of what kind of behavior, language and so on, is not tolerated.
- That sexual harassment is defined by the experience of the offended and not by the intention of the offender: This is important to state, because it must be the experience of the offended that counts – even if the offender did not mean any harm. If the offender did not mean to harass anyone, that just means that the problem is hopefully easier handled or solved, but not that there isn’t a sexual harassment problem.
- State that employees subjected to second-hand sexual harassment are also covered by this policy and that they can get help and support as well. Define that second-hand sexual harassment is sexual harassment or other negative consequences that affect people who support, help or deal with another person’s experiences of being sexually harassed. It is important to deal with second-hand sexual harassment as well, because it is a tool harassers or other bystanders use to create a culture of silence. Therefore, it is important to broaden the definition of victims/survivors of sexual harassment so that it also includes people subjected to second-hand sexual harassment.
- Who in the company to contact in case a person is subjected to, or sees others subjected to sexual harassment: It is important to have very detailed and explicit ways to deal with sexual harassment. Who to contact? (preferably more than one person in case the offender is the contact person) What is this person obliged to do when in the know about a sexual harassment case? And so on. There should be a **very detailed** manual about who does what and has what kind of responsibility so that a sexual harassment case does not risk not being dealt with properly.
- What disciplinary action to apply for sexual harassment/whether there are sanctions for sexually harassment behaviour (some companies will not impose sanctions in advance, because each case is evaluated on a case-by-case basis): This is important to state so every employee/employer knows the consequences of sexual harassment, or that there will be consequences.
- That one can speak anonymously about cases.



And at last:
A quiz on what you have learned today



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At end the course the participants will get six questions to answer individually to see what they have learned today.

Give the participants 10-15 minutes (or what is needed) to write down what they believe is the right answer. There is often not one specific answer – see the answer on the next slide's notes.

Quiz

1. Which three factors point to who is most at risk of being subjected to sexual harassment?
2. What words/sentences are advantageous to use or not to use if you suspect that someone has been subjected to sexual harassment and you want to ask the person about it?
3. What is important to remember to say in a conversation with someone who says he/she/they *has* experienced sexual harassment?
4. What is important *not* to say in a situation with someone who *has* been subjected to sexual harassment?
5. What matters the most: The *experience* of the person who has been subjected to sexual harassment, or the *intention* of the harasser?
6. Why are conversations about boundaries and culture important when the aim is to prevent sexual harassment?



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Answers:

1. gender – age – power
2. You don't ask directly "Have you experienced sexual harassment?". You ask more indirectly without using the word "sexual harassment".
3. Let the person know, that their experience is what matters, not the *intention* of the harasser *and* that the person has done nothing wrong and is in no way responsible for the harassment.
4. It is important not to say something that eludes to the fact that the person who has been subjected to sexual harassed somehow welcomed the harassment or invited it, or to say something about the fact the the person should have said "no" or focus on the fact that perhaps the person who is suspected of harassing, probably didn't mean to do any harm.
5. The experience of the person who has been subjected to sexual harassment matters more than the intention of the harasser. Of course, if later a conversation is initiated with the person who is the supposed harasser, is it relevant to find out what the intentions for the actions were. Perhaps it was just a mistake and the very mentioning of it the the harasser, makes the person change his/her/their behaviour. But even though the intention was not to harass, it is still a serious

issue that should be dealt with.

6. Because those conversation help everyone being more sensitive to the fact that each person has different boundaries AND they practice everyone in becoming better communicators about their own boundaries, their likes and dislikes. Those conversational/communicative skills are a prerequisite to creating an environment free of sexual harassment, where everyone and their boundaries are respected.